

Field Report

Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area

■ 1.0 Summary

The Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area (RRCNCA) is a 196,000-acre natural area of spectacular beauty adjacent to the city of Las Vegas, one of the fastest growing urbanized areas in the United States. Visitation is heaviest during weekends in the spring and fall months, when casual sightseers mix with active recreational enthusiasts. Visitation is increasing at a rate of approximately three to five percent per year.

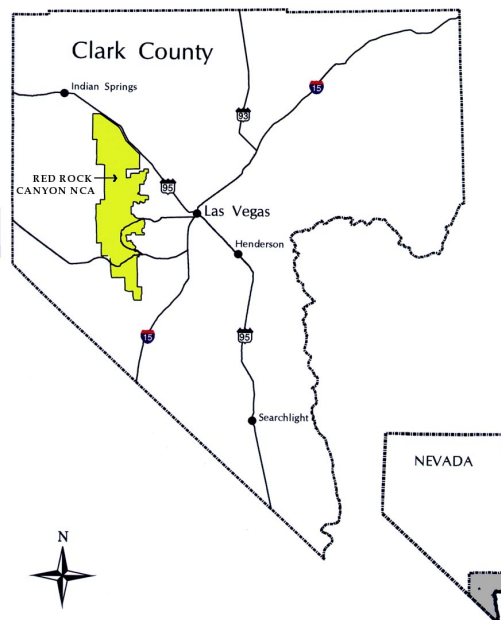
The site is served by a 13-mile one-way loop road (Scenic Drive Road), which can become quite congested during times of heavy visitation. Conflicts often occur between auto, tour buses, bicycles, and pedestrians. Parking along Scenic Drive is limited. Based upon all these factors, this site appears to be a good candidate for implementation of Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS). The BLM, which manages RRCNCA, is planning a shuttle for rock climbers. This shuttle system could be expanded in the future to reduce congestion along Scenic Drive.

Two feasible ATS options have been identified: a Climber Shuttle that could be implemented immediately and a Visitor Center Shuttle that may be feasible in two to three years. The Climber Shuttle would provide access to climbing areas for rock climbing visitors, and would free up parking spaces along Scenic Drive. This shuttle would pick up climbers from a satellite parking area, possibly the campground, and distribute them to the climbing sites. A Visitor Center Shuttle would pick up and drop off sightseers from the Visitor Center and transport them along Scenic Drive. The shuttle would stop at overlooks and trail heads.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

The RRCNCA is located in Clark County in southern Nevada, 10 miles west of downtown Las Vegas (see Figure 1). Primary access to the RRCNCA is provided via West Charleston Boulevard (State Route 159), with access to the southern portion of the site is provided via SR 160.

Figure 1. Vicinity Map

2.2 Administration and Classification

The BLM manages the RRCNCA; which was originally designated as the Red Rock Canyon Recreation Lands in 1968. In 1990 Congress designated 83,100 acres as the RRCNCA, which was expanded in 1994 and 1998, resulting in its current size of approximately 196,000 acres.

2.3 Physical Description

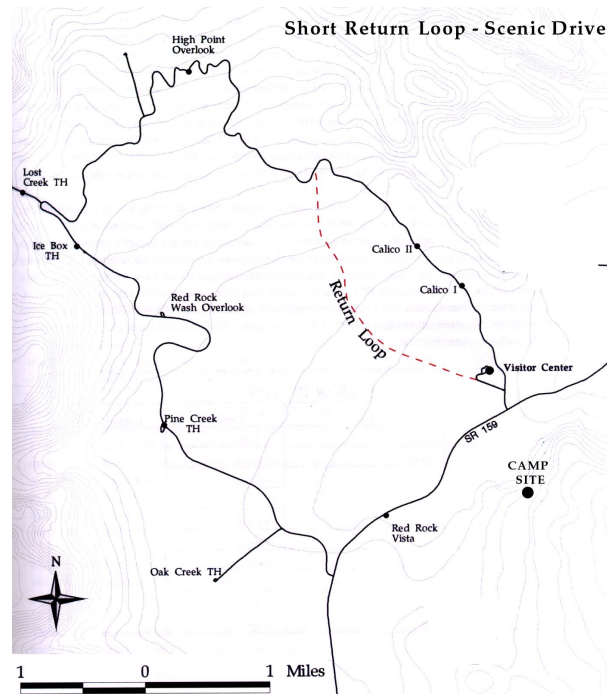
the RRCNCA is characterized by its diverse and rugged terrain, and represents some of the best examples of the Mojave Desert's ecosystem. The most significant geologic feature of the RRCNCA is the Keystone Thrust Fault. This fault, which extends for approximately 13 miles, consists of a gray limestone crustal plate that was thrust up and over a younger red sandstone crustal plate.

The site is also unique in that it forms the western boundary of the Las Vegas urbanized area, one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country. Facilities on the RRCNCA are described below.

- **Entrance Station** – An entrance station is located at the beginning of Scenic Drive to collect fees from RRCNCA visitors.
- **Scenic Drive** – RRCNCA includes a 13-mile one-way, horseshoe-shaped Scenic Drive (see Figure 2). The Drive begins and ends at locations on State Highway 159 approximately two miles apart. The Scenic Drive provides access to five overlooks, nine trails,

and two picnic areas. There are approximately 400 designated parking spaces located at the overlooks and trailheads along the Scenic Drive.

Figure 2. Scenic Drive and Planned Return Loop



- **Visitor Center** – The recently upgraded 7,600 square foot Visitor Center provides information on recreational opportunities, wildlife, and cultural resources at RRCNCA (See Figure 3). The Visitor Center is located on a spur road off Scenic Drive, approximately one-quarter mile from the RRCNCA entrance. The Visitor Center has approximately 150 parking spaces.
- **Bicycle Pavilion** – The pavilion, located adjacent to the Visitor Center includes restroom and picnic facilities for bicycle enthusiasts.
- **Other Major Roads** – Other major roads located at RRCNCA include State Highway 159 (11.9 miles), State Highway 160 (4.3 miles), Lee Canyon Road (5.6 miles), Kyle Canyon Road (5.6 miles), and Rocky Gap Road (6.0 miles).
- **Campground** – The 13-Mile Campground, located south of State Highway 159 and the Scenic Drive, consists of 55 individual, 14 walk-in, and three group sites. Each site has a parking stall, picnic pad and cooking grill. Planned expansion will add 45 individual and seven group sites.

Figure 3. View of the Visitor Center and Red Rock Cliffs Beyond



- **Hiking/Biking Trails** – A trail system for both hiking and mountain biking begins at the Visitor Center. RRCNCA has approximately 160 miles of bike trails and 70 miles of hiking trails.
- **Rock Climbing** – RRCNCA is world renowned for its rock climbing on its numerous and diverse cliff faces.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Conservation Area

The site was established in 1990 as a National Conservation Area, with further expansion in 1994 and 1998. The primary objective of the RRCNCA is to conserve, protect and enhance the unique and nationally important natural and recreational resources located within the site.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

RRCNCA receives between 1.0 to 1.2 million visitors annually. Visitors pay a daily fee of \$5.00 per vehicle. Based on information available from the Site Manager, visitation is growing at an annual rate of approximately three to five percent. Tour buses from Las Vegas are also visiting RRCNCA in increasing numbers. Approximately 300,000 to 400,000 visitors stop at the Visitor Center.

The peak periods for visitation are during the spring and fall months. Based on visitor surveys, the majority of RRCNCA visitors are in the 25 to 44-year age group and well educated with some college education. Approximately half of the visitors are from outside Nevada, and a little more than half are male. Many visitors are casual tourists that come to Las Vegas for other social/recreational interests and visit the RRCNCA for its “desert experience” and to enjoy the Scenic Drive. The Scenic Drive and adjacent overlooks and trailheads are the focal points for visitation to RRCNCA. The average length of stay for visitors to these areas is between two to three hours.

Local residents tend to visit the RRCNCA on a regular basis for recreation such as hiking, biking, and rock climbing. The RRCNCA is world renowned for rock climbing and attract visitors from around the world. These visitors stay longer than the casual tourist visitor.

Local school groups also visit the site, often participating in ranger-led interpretive talks and walks.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Parking is a continuing problem with limited opportunities along the Scenic Drive. Areas frequented by rock climbers are among the most popular in RRCNCA. Parking in these areas is most in demand and can fill up on busy weekends (See Figure 4). Scenic Drive has been closed when the parking spaces fill up. RRCNCA management has attempted to provide parking areas for casual users separate from active recreational enthusiasts, such as rock climbers. This has not been entirely successful, especially with the overall deficiency in the amount of parking available.

When parking areas fill, visitors park along the side of the road or pull off at non-designated overlooks. Pullouts for tourist buses are limited to two or three locations along Scenic Drive.

The number of motorists and bicyclists on Scenic Drive are causing increasing safety concerns. The General Management Plan (GMP) identifies motor vehicle accidents caused by speeding, reckless driving, and driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol as the greatest single threat to public safety at RRCNCA. In addition, drivers distracted by the scenery may not notice bicyclists, who often ride two or three abreast.

The Scenic Drive is typically closed when the Sandstone, Red Rock, or Pine Creek washes flood or when ice develops on the upper portions of the road. Both of these conditions occur several times per year.

Figure 4. Parking Facility Located Adjacent to Popular Rock Climbing Area Along Scenic Drive



3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

RRCNCA is located adjacent to Las Vegas, Nevada, a world renowned tourist destination with 29.6 million visitors reported in 1996. The Las Vegas/Clark County region is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States. The tremendous rate of growth in Las Vegas is resulting in urban sprawl and increased traffic congestion. RRCNCA provides a western growth boundary to the urbanized landscape of Las Vegas, with development already occurring directly adjacent to RRCNCA's boundary. The compatibility of adjacent land uses with the RRCNCA is a major concern. With growth and development occurring so close the RRCNCA, increased local visitation will put more demands upon the resource. Many residents of Las Vegas use RRCNCA as a place to get away from the noise and congestion of the city. Residents are concerned about the increasing visitation to the RRCNCA and the impact it will have on its natural and cultural resources and physical beauty.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

RRCNCA protects some of the finest Mojave Desert scenery and habitat in the west. The most significant geographic feature of RRCNCA is the Keystone Thrust Fault, which creates the dramatic landscape that makes RRCNCA noteworthy. Petrified sandstone formations add color and natural beauty to the cliffs created by the fault. RRCNCA has nine different plant communities that support a variety of flora and fauna species. Indigenous Native American groups used resources from RRCNCA more than 5,500 years

ago. Evidence of their occupation can be found at RRCNCA in the form of pictographs, petroglyphs, agave roasting pits, and handmade tools.

Increased visitation to the site will bring increased impacts on fragile resources. Excessive vehicular traffic brings noise and air pollution and increases the risk of collisions with animals. The intrusion associated with increased vehicles and paved areas can diminish the quality of the natural setting.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Recreational opportunities at RRCNCA include both active and passive activities. Active recreational activities include camping, rock climbing, bicycling (both on-road and off-road), and hiking. Passive recreation activities include driving the Scenic Drive, stopping at overlooks to view the scenery, and picnicking. Opportunities for increased passive recreational activities are and will be limited by the ability to access and to park at key locations.

RRCNCA is recognized as a world-class climbing destination and is popular to climbers from around the world. The length of stay for climbers is much longer than for casual visitors, with many climbers using the campground facilities. This often contributes to a lack of parking spaces along Scenic Drive.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The *Proposed General Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement* was prepared in July 1999, replacing the 1995 Interim GMP. The GMP recommended construction of a 2.65-mile return road at Sandstone Quarry. The new road will create a new and shorter six-mile loop that will connect with the Visitor Center (see Figure 2). The additional Scenic Drive loop will provide the following advantages:

- Provide a shorter, less difficult, route for bicyclists than have difficulty climbing the hills on the 13-mile route;
- Avoid flood and icing at certain areas, allowing at least a portion of Scenic Drive to stay open year round; and
- Provide a shorter route/return loop for visitors with less time or interest in traveling the entire length of Scenic Drive.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

RRCNCA staff has developed close coordination with City, State, and Federal agencies, as well as members of community interest groups. Significant coordination activities are addressed below.

- **Nevada Division of State Parks (NDSP), Spring Mountain Ranch State Park** – NDSP provides management support and law enforcement support to the BLM staff at RRCNCA.
- **U.S. Forest Service (USFS)** – RRCNCA shares a common boundary with the Spring Mountain National Recreation Management Area. BLM and the USFS coordinate on management and planning issues.
- **Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (METRO)** – BLM rangers and METRO officers provide backup support for traffic accidents and law enforcement.
- **The Sierra Club** – The local chapter of the Sierra Club is closely involved with planning and management issues at RRCNCA.
- **Clark County** – The Clark County Planning Department and BLM work closely to address transportation, recreation, and other planning issues for RRCNCA.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The lack of parking along Scenic Drive is the most significant problem at RRCNCA. This problem will be exacerbated as visitation continues to increase. On busy weekends, primarily in the spring and fall, parking areas fill up and traffic congestion occurs along Scenic Drive. Conflicts between vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians result in safety concerns. As a result of congestion, visitor experience is greatly diminished.

Implementation of a shuttle service along all or portions of Scenic Drive would provide an option to driving and those seeking use of limited parking facilities. Implementation of ATS strategies would also relieve congestion along Scenic Drive and throughout the site.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

Feasible ATS options include the following:

- **Climber Shuttle** – A shuttle bus to provide access to climbing areas for rock climbing visitors. This shuttle would pick up climbers from a satellite parking area, possibly

the campground, and distribute them to the climbing sites. This would free up parking spaces along Scenic Drive.

- **Visitor Center Shuttle** – A tram-type shuttle to pick up and drop off casual visitors from the Visitor Center and transport them along Scenic Drive. The shuttle would stop at overlooks and trail heads. To accommodate increased visitation to RRCNCA and to relieve congestion and parking demands along Scenic Drive, this option may be feasible in two to three years.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

The Bureau of Land Management, Las Vegas Field Office, Proposed General Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, July 1999.

<http://www.ci.las-vegas.nv.us> (visited October 17, 1999).

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Dave Wolf, Manager, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area

Kristine Bunnell, Trails Coordinator, Comprehensive Planning, Clark County, Nevada

Ron Gregory, Principal Environmental Planner, Comprehensive Planning, Clark County, Nevada

Howard Booth, Environmental Activist, Sierra Club

Jane Feldman, Environmental Activist, Sierra Club